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The Human Being as Body and Soul: A Reconsideration

The human being is a unified substance of body and rational soul. As a unified substance, the human person is both in-itself and toward-others. To approach these conclusions properly an overview of hylemorphism is necessary. Through this process the human being will be understood as a unified substance, the rational soul will be properly defined, and the rational soul's subsistence will be demonstrated through its immaterial operations. After an understanding of hylemorphism is garnered an understanding of the human being as both form and matter will be brought forth. Once these conclusions have been demonstrated objections that posit the human being as either form or matter will be analyzed. Once the human being has been recognized for what it is, the person's place on the frontier of being will appear.

The doctrine of hylemorphism maintains that all composite beings are composed of the metaphysical co-principles of form and matter¹. The metaphysical co-principle of form serves as the principle of similarity amongst common composite beings. In this, the form is what makes a being to be this kind of being and not that kind of being. In union with form the metaphysical co-principle of matter serves as the principle of dissimilarity amongst beings². For instance, it is the form of a tree that renders all trees similar whereas it is the matter which renders this individual tree different from that tree. This is because the very nature of matter includes the inability for it to be in the same place as other matter. Thus, as all composed beings are those that are composed of act and potency, form actualizes the potential in a tree's matter to form that of an actually existing tree.

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¹ STh I, q. 9 a. 1.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. Rowan, (Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), 556.

Accordingly, hylemorphism entails that things cannot be reduced to matter in general. This is so because matter is organized by, and is for, the immaterial co-principle of form. Further, as form and matter are co-principles of composed beings, form generally does not exist of itself and matter does not exist of itself. As a result, form can be seen to serve as the immaterial unifying force which composes a being to be distinctly this kind of being whereas matter serves to compose a being to be this particular being and not that being³. Both co-principles are required for a composed being to be and a being composed of matter and form is a substance.

A substance is that which exists in-itself and is also toward-others⁴. The substance we are concerned with here is the substance of a human being. Like trees, human beings are composed beings of matter and form. In the composed being of the substance human being the form is the rational soul and the matter is the human body⁵. The soul is the accidental mover that moves the body and is thus the principle of life⁶. Consequently, the form of the soul as the principle of life is that through which living beings have operations such as nutrition, sensation, and growth. The form of a soul actualizes the potential matter of a human being into an actually existing human being and acts as the unifying center of all vital activities of the body⁷. Therefore, in the composed being of a human being there is the intimate relationship of the rational soul and the human body in which the form is an organizing principle of the being and is always united to the material body to compose one human being.

Now not all substances are subsistent and not all souls are immaterial and thus immortal. For a thing to be subsistent, it must have an operation apart from the matter it informs. This is so because perishing is the separation of matter from form. Accordingly, the forms of such things as plants, rocks, and animals, have no reality apart from their reality as coexistent in material things⁸. The operations of sensation, nutrition, and growth are operations that completely rely on matter. For example, nutrition requires the transformation of matter into different pieces of matter, and sensation requires the particular instance of matter to actualize the potencies of the senses.

As a result, when the matter of beings such as trees and horses diminishes to the point where it cannot sustain the form, the form ceases to be. This is because the form and its operations are completely dependent on matter⁹. Thus for the rational soul to be subsistent it must have an operation independent of the human body since forms completely dependent on matter cannot have be-

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 426.

⁴ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993), 13-14.

⁵ STh I, q. 76, a. 1, ob. 6.

⁶ STh I, q. 75, a. 1.

⁷ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 35.

⁸ SCG II, 55.2.

⁹ D. S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 250.

ing apart from matter¹⁰. The rational soul has various operations. As noted earlier, among these operations of the rational soul are nutrition, growth, sensation, reproduction, locomotion, and immanent causality. These lower operations are completely dependent on matter. However, the intellectual operations of the rational soul are not completely dependent on matter. It is this operation of intellect and will to which we will now turn.

It is to be granted that all intellectual knowledge starts in the senses. There is nothing in the intellect which is not first in the senses¹¹. More so, the rational soul does require the body for its operations towards those of a human being¹². Consequently, it must be allowed that the full extent of the immaterial operation about to be posited is reliant indirectly on a material operation, for matter is for the form¹³. However, this is not to state that the immaterial operation can be completely reduced to a material operation. The immaterial operation of the intellect is indirectly reliant on matter, yet it expresses an immaterial operation apart from matter. One immaterial operation of the rational soul that is apart from matter is the intellect's self-reflexivity.

A material being is not entirely self-reflexive. However, in acting the intellect reflects on itself entirely. Since a body does not move as a whole, but rather moves as a part moves a part, it follows that the self-reflexive intellect cannot be a material body¹⁴. For example, a sense does not know itself or its operations. Sight does not see itself nor does sight see that it sees. However, the intellect does have such a self-reflexive power. The intellect can know itself and know that it knows¹⁵. More so, the self-reflexivity of the intellect identifies the knower and the known as 'I.' Thus, in the 'I', the speaker knows himself as speaker in the same act that he knows of which he speaks¹⁶. Consequently, the intellect must be immaterial and the substance of which this operation flows must itself be partly immaterial as well, for it is impossible for an active power which exists in matter to extend its action toward the production of an immaterial effect¹⁷.

The abstraction of universals also demonstrates that the intellect is not material as all material things are particular rather than universal¹⁸. As the discussion of form and matter implied above, if the intellect were material and thus apprehended only by the material, the intellect would only be able to comprehend individuals¹⁹. Yet the intellect can understand universals through the

¹⁰ SCG II, 51.

¹¹ STh I, q. 12, a. 12.

¹² STh I, q. 75, a. 1, ad 3.

¹³ STh I-II, q. 2, a. 5.

¹⁴ SCG II, 49.8.

¹⁵ SCG II, 66.3.

¹⁶ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 44; STh I, q. 118, a. 1.

¹⁷ STh I, q. 118, a. 2.

¹⁸ STh I, q. 75, a. 2.

¹⁹ STh I, q. 75, a. 5, ad 1.

power of abstraction, and it is through an understanding of this power of abstraction in which St. Thomas identifies the rational soul as immaterial and thus as subsistent.

Through the intellect of the rational soul human beings are capable of understanding universals. In this process, the intellect of the human being receives the substantial form of another being without going through a substantial change itself. For example, from the individual rock the intellect is able to abstract the form of rock. Now if the intellect were material this process of understanding universals would entail that the intellect undergoes a substantial change upon receiving the substantial form of another. In this case, every time a human being abstracted the form rock it would change into a rock. Yet this is not the case. Thus, through the intellect, the human being abstracts the universal from particular beings composed of form and matter in a manner that allows the intellect to possess another being's substantial form without substantially changing into that being²⁰.

The abstraction of universals, with universals serving as a proper object of the intellect, also points to the immateriality of the intellect in another way. The proper objects of the intellect, such as universals, concepts, and propositions, are abstract, un-extended, and universal. Contrary to this, what we find in physical matter is extended and particular. Accordingly, there is a deep-seated ontological inequality between the proper objects of the intellect and any kind of physical embodiment these objects could have²¹. More so, abstraction contains an infinite number of singulars whereas nothing material can hold an infinite number²².

Further, when the intellect abstracts universal concepts it abstracts and entertains them perfectly. For example, when the intellect abstracts triangularity from a particular triangle the concept is entirely determinate whereas the particular triangle is not entirely determinate²³. Now, the mental image brought forth from the imagination of a human being may not be entirely determinate. However, this is to be expected. The imagination is an operation of sensation and sensation is entirely reliant on matter. Yet when the intellect maintains the concept of triangularity, rather than when the imagination entertains the phantasm, the concept of triangularity is necessarily perfect whereas any triangularity in matter or in sense knowledge is indeterminate²⁴.

This immaterial possession of ideas such as determinate immaterial universals demonstrates that the rational soul has an immaterial operation that is separate from the body, as universals necessarily only exist immaterially. The existence of material universals is impossible as matter is the principle of indi-

²⁰ SCG II, 49.3.

²¹ D. S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism*, 252.

²² STh I-II, q. 2, a. 6; SCG II, 59.6.

²³ E. Feser, *The Last Superstition*, (Indiana: St Augustine Press, 2008), 124.

²⁴ SCG II, 50.5.

viduality and indeterminacy²⁵. Consequently, the rational soul's intellect demonstrates that the rational soul has an immaterial operation. Following the principle *agere sequitur esse* alluded to earlier; the mode of a being's operation follows the mode of the being. Therefore, the rational soul must have an immaterial mode of being²⁶. The rational soul must have an immaterial mode of being because if the rational soul is not immaterial there is not sufficient reason for the immaterial operation it possesses to exist. To judge and defend this claim, consider the principle of sufficient reason.

The principle of sufficient reason states that every contingent thing that exists must have a sufficient cause. Everything that is has a sufficient reason for existing and act is proportional to the nature which possesses it²⁷. For example, if the effect of heat is found the total cause must in some way be able to make the effect of heat intelligible. Thus, if the rational soul is material it would be concluded that the rational soul would only have actual knowledge of material things as nothing acts without keeping with its species. A being's operation does not go beyond the mode of its being²⁸. However, the examples above demonstrate that the rational soul has immaterial operations. Therefore, as the principle of sufficient reason and the principle of *agere sequitur esse* display, the human being's immaterial operation must be caused by an immaterial form since it is not possible for there to be an effect which was not first in the total cause, act is proportional to the nature that possesses it²⁹.

As demonstrated, the rational soul has an operation that is not dependent on matter. As non-subsistence is due to dependence on matter, subsistence can be seen to be due to independence from matter. The immaterial operation of the human being displays that the rational soul can act by itself and thus the rational soul is an immaterial subsistent form³⁰. Due to being a subsistent thing with an operation apart from any bodily organ, the immaterial soul is excluded from the corruption of the body and is consequently immortal. To be corrupted by the corruption of the body the rational soul would have to be a dependent existent on the material body. Contrary to this, the rational soul is an independent per se existent and it accordingly cannot be accidentally corrupted³¹.

As briefly noted above, material things perish because they lose their forms. In composed beings, perishing is the loss of a substantial form and organized matter³². For instance, a horse perishes because its matter loses the substantial form of horse and takes on the new substantial form of carcass. A subsistent form which possesses its own particular operation apart from matter, like that of the

²⁵ STh I, q. 75, a. 3, ad 2.

²⁶ STh I, q. 105, a. 5.

²⁷ STh I, q. 14, a. 1.

²⁸ SCG II, 49.5.

²⁹ STh I, q. 12, a. 3.

³⁰ SCG II, 51.

³¹ STh I, q. 75 a. 6.

³² STh I, q. 76, a. 6.

rational soul, cannot perish when it loses the matter which it informed in principle. This is because a subsistent form exists through itself. Upon loss of the human body the rational soul no longer composes the being of human being but rather composes the being of form and participated existence³³.

The time spent detailing and defending the immaterial operations of the human person displays that as unified substance of body and immaterial soul, the human person finds itself on the frontier of being³⁴. Due to having an intellectual nature, the human being is a master of itself³⁵. The human being is distinct from all others and a responsible, self-conscious, source of its own actions³⁶. This intellectual immaterial power also demonstrates that the soul subsists on its own apart from matter as its operation is apart from matter. Due to the subsistence of the rational soul it is subsequently immortal as it cannot be corrupted by the accidental corruption of matter. Accordingly, the human being as rational animal finds itself at the highest level of material being. More so, as embodied spirit the human being finds itself at the lowest level of spirits³⁷. As evident in the philosophical and scientific culture today, the premise that intellectual operation is immaterial is often contended, and the status of the human being is diminished.

One objection that attempts to diminish the human being aims at the principle of sufficient reason. As noted prior, the principle of sufficient reason was employed to note how an immaterial operation requires an immaterial cause. This principle was used to establish that the immaterial intellect and will must stem from an immaterial form. In denying the principle of sufficient reason the objection is often used as a premise towards the conclusion that the human being is purely matter. Yet there are demonstrative reasons why the principle of sufficient reason must be true.

First, our common experience demonstrates that we tend to find explanations for things when we look for explanations. If the principle of sufficient reason were false it would be a miracle that we can find such consistent explanations common to our experience³⁸. Secondly, if the principle of sufficient reason were false there would not be a reason for our perceptual experiences³⁹. For instance, there would be no reason as to why I perceived a dog instead of a cat. Now, if there is no sufficient reason for perceptual experience there is also no justification to trust the perceptions which ground empirical science⁴⁰. Consequently, without the principle of sufficient reason empirical science would fall.

³³ STh I, q. 75, a. 5.

³⁴ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33; STh I, q. 76, a. 5.

³⁸ E. Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, (Germany: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 133.

³⁹ E. Feser, *Aristotle's Revenge*, (Germany: Editiones Scholasticae, 2019), 74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

The third reason why the principle of sufficient reason must be true is that we believe our rationality embraces true conclusions that are led up to by true premises. Thus, the principle of sufficient reason underscores all rational inquiry and knowledge. Yet if one were to deny the principle of sufficient reason there is no reason why this, or any other argument, is true. As a result, if one were to deny the principle of sufficient reason the individual cuts off the sufficient reason for their denial⁴¹. Accordingly, the principle of sufficient reason must stand for there to be rational discourse and dialogue. Another objection in which the human person, as immaterial soul and material body, is contended stems from neuroscience.

As neuroscience has shown, the matter of the brain is closely related to mental states. In the hylemorphism described above, this is exactly the kind of relationship one would expect⁴². As a form of rock cannot function without the matter of rock, a rational soul cannot fully function without the matter of the body. Further and as already granted, all knowledge begins in the senses. Yet intellectual knowledge is not entirely dependent on matter, and also transcends matter. Accordingly, those who attempt to reduce the intellectual operation of human beings to brain states elevate the material cause to the level of formal cause. As we have shown, if the formal cause of the rational soul was material it could not abstract the determinate universals, or know itself as 'I'. Consequently, if one elevates the material cause of brains states to that of formal cause, one has the burden of proving universals are material.

Further, in reducing the operation of the intellect to brain activity, the adherent commits the fallacy of composition. If one were to reduce water and say that it is nothing but flammable hydrogen and flammable oxygen, the curious case of how when combined they put out fire is left unexplained⁴³. Consequently, water cannot be reduced to just hydrogen and oxygen because it leaves out the new essence, properties, and operations, they receive when composed and united. Similarly, to say that a human being's intellectual operation is nothing but matter leaves out the curious case of how when composed with a rational soul the brain transcends the ability of minds with material brains that are larger.

Some may also contend that the material activity of the brain is synonymous with the activity of thinking. However, action is intentional; action and thought are always directed towards something. Therefore, to state that action is directed towards itself is to commit a category error⁴⁴. Moreover, as action is always directed towards something the activity of the intellect is always directed towards something. This something that the intellect is directed towards, say when it has a thought, is known as intentionality. Intentionality poses simi-

⁴¹ E. Feser, *Aristotle's Revenge*, 77.

⁴² D. S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism*, 254; STh I-II, q. 2, a. 5.

⁴³ D. S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism*, 75.

⁴⁴ E. Feser, *Aristotle's Revenge*, 444-445.

lar problems to those who wish to reduce the mind to matter as in principle one cannot locate intentionality materially.

Certain other naturalistic accounts of the mind posit that the mind can be explained in a manner that likens the brain to a computer and the mind to a software program. In this account thoughts are explained away as symbols in the brain and thinking becomes the going from one symbol to another in the manner that an algorithm does. Even though this theory holds weight amongst people today, the theory is simply incoherent. A symbol is not a symbol unless there is a user of that symbol⁴⁵. More so, as symbol comes from syntax, syntax also presupposes an observer relation⁴⁶. Further, algorithms are followed unconsciously in principle⁴⁷. Yet if algorithms are being used to explain thought, and thought is in principle conscious, an unconscious means is used to explain a conscious effect. With the objections analyzed and refuted regarding human beings as material, it may often be maintained that the human being is simply immaterial.

As the discussion of hylemorphism noted above, the human being is a substance composed intimately of both form and matter. Yet it is sometimes contended that the human being is simply immaterial form. That is, it is sometimes objected that the human being is simply immaterial soul rather than soul and body. One famous instance of this is found in the works of Renee Descartes. Renee Descartes posited that the human being was composed of the completely distinct immaterial mind and the completely distinct material body. Therefore, to Descartes, the human being was not a unified substance. To see how the human being is simply not an immaterial soul, a brief look at the thought of Descartes is necessary.

Renee Descartes maintained that which was clear and distinct in intellectual perception was true⁴⁸. Since the clear and distinct idea of the mind did not contain the clear and distinct idea of an extended body, and the clear and distinct idea of the body was separate from that of the clear and distinct idea of the mind, for Descartes it followed that the soul was distinct from the body⁴⁹. With the concept of the self as a non-extended thinking thing, and the conception of the body as a separate and extended thing, Descartes held that the human being, mind and body, constituted two distinct and irreducible substances. Accordingly, the human being was not a unified substance of body and soul, but was rather a distinct soul trapped in a distinct body.

To see why the position of Renee Descartes is false, and to see why the above mentioned hylemorphic account of the human being is correct, consider

⁴⁵ Ibid., 354.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 364.

⁴⁷ E. Feser, *The Last Superstition*, 241.

⁴⁸ R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. D. A. Cress, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 22-24.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 50, 56.

the unsolvable problem of the communication between these two substances. A distinct separate immaterial substance can never enter into an efficient causal relationship with a distinct separate material substance⁵⁰. Thus in Descartes' account, there is not a sufficient reason as to why the mind impacts the body and how the body impacts the mind. Yet with an understanding of the person under hylemorphism, the interaction problem between mind and body is nullified simply because there are not two separate substances that need to interact. An accidental disposition cannot possibly come between the intellectual soul and the body since the soul is substantial form of the body⁵¹.

Under the hylemorphic conception of the human being explained above, the human being is not two complete and distinct substances that necessitate interaction. The hylemorphic conception of the human being demonstrates that the human being is one unified being. A human mind is not an independent substance that can exist on its own as a complete human being, nor is a human body an independent substance with like capabilities. Rather a human being is composed of co-principles and the soul is united to the body without intermediation. It is essential for the soul to be intimately united to a body because if it were not being a human person would be accidental⁵². Consequently, a human being is soul and body.

With the metaphysical principles of the human being analyzed and defended, one aspect of the human person as substance has been brought forth. This analysis has shown that the human being, as matter and form, possesses the immaterial operations of intellect and will. These operations, the in-itself aspect of the human being, are expressed via self-consciousness and self-determination⁵³. Yet as noted earlier, there is also another dimension of being as substance, the toward-others aspect. In the above rejection of Descartes' conception of the human person, it was noted that Descartes' turn to the subject negated mind/body interaction. However, Descartes' turn to the subject also negates the importance of the toward-others aspect of the human person. This issue is solved with a further understanding of the metaphysics of St. Thomas.

All being is naturally inclined to seek its own perfection and to communicate its own goodness through its operations⁵⁴. Following the principle of sufficient reason, the goodness that a being can communicate depends on the goodness of the being. As matter is to form as potency is to act, a composed being lacks goodness and thus cannot communicate perfect goodness. Yet, the more a being is good the more a being can communicate goodness⁵⁵. More so, the communication of goodness, the acting upon another, requires that the acted

⁵⁰ E. Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. P. Trower, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 32.

⁵¹ STh I, q. 76, a. 6.

⁵² STh I, q. 118, a. 3.

⁵³ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 64.

⁵⁴ STh I, q. 47, a. 1.

⁵⁵ STh I-II, q. 18, a. 1.

upon lack and consist of potency. Thus potency, as the capacity to undergo change, is considered a negative aspect in most composed beings that are acted upon⁵⁶.

Thus as noted, the human being is composed of matter and form, of body and soul. This composition displays that the human being is composed of act and potency. The presence of potency thus typically implies the presence of lack and the negative capacity to be acted upon. However, when being arrives at the level of person, a level to which this paper has spent considerable time analyzing, we find that potency, as matter is for form, is for the perfection of the person. More so, as matter is the proper subject of corruption, a thing is thus free from corruption to the extent that it is free from matter⁵⁷. To better see this, let us return to our discussion of self-reflexivity.

It was noted above that the 'I' of the person indicates the actuality of the immaterial soul. Since potency is moved to act by something actual, it follows that the actual reflexive self-awareness must be moved from potency to act. This potency for receptivity, which presupposes relation, thus serves as a perfective aspect of the human being and not simply the negative aspect of being acted upon⁵⁸. For if the potency for receptivity was not a perfective aspect, then the in-itself of self-awareness would be incomplete because the self-awareness of the inner 'I' must be moved from potency to act by another 'I'⁵⁹. Accordingly, the toward-others aspect of the substance, the relational aspect of all being, when considered in the human person, is not a one-sided affair. The meaning of relation and receptivity is not that of one act depriving another of a potency, rather relation is reciprocity and reciprocity leads both to the natural inclination to the perfection of the person and the natural inclination to communicate the person's goodness⁶⁰.

Consequently, the human being is within itself via self-consciousness and self-determination, the immaterial intellect and the will. Additionally, through the communication of goodness, through the toward-others aspect of substance, the person in-itself is fulfilled and the goodness of the person is communicated⁶¹. Therefore, in relation, the human being is not simply deprived of an actuality. In relation, the person does not lose the substantial qualities of self-possession and self-identity in reciprocity, as a tree loses its actuality when acted upon by fire. Rather the person increases in self-awareness, self-possession, and self-identity, when he engages in receptivity with others. Thus, through an ever-growing set of personal relations, the more a person is in

⁵⁶ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 20.

⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. R. J. Regan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84.

⁵⁸ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 65; STh I, q. 87, a. 1.

⁶⁰ W. Norris Clarke, *Person and Being*, 73-74.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

communion the more a person takes possession of himself⁶². More so, as all being, as substance, is in-itself and toward-others, the person finds himself as the conscious expression of this breathing in and breathing out of the entire universe⁶³.

As this paper has shown, the human being is the composed substance of rational soul and body. Since the rational soul possesses operations that are not directly reliant on matter, it follows that the rational soul is immortal. However, as the rational soul is the form of the human being, without the matter of the body, the rational soul is not the complete substance of a human being. More so, objections stating that the human being is simply soul, and objections stating that the human being is simply matter, have been refuted.

Accordingly, the human being finds itself at the frontier of being as both body and spirit. Investigation into this level of being, consisting of self-awareness and self-determination, has brought out the positive aspect of receptivity. More so, investigation into the person who is at the frontier of being has revealed that receptivity is necessary for the fulfillment of the person's natural inclination for perfection, and necessary for the fulfillment of the person's natural inclination to communicate its own goodness.

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Summary

Under Hylemorphism, all composed beings are composed of form and matter. Accordingly, the human being is a unified substance of soul and body. Through the operations of a human being an immaterial power is manifested which demonstrates that the rational soul is immaterial and immortal. Through these elements of Thomistic metaphysics, a clear understanding of the person emerges as both in-itself and toward-others. After key metaphysical principles such as the principle of sufficient reason are defended, arguments against the thesis which claim the person is reducible to body or soul are rebuked and the Hylemorphic account is shown to stand. Leaning on the work of W. Norris Clarke, the person as body and soul is thus shown to be the frontier of being.

Keywords: Being, Human, Hylemorphism, Immaterial, Intellect, Person, Personalism, Rational, Soul.

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